## CRS Report for Congress

# The Iraqi Security Forces: The Challenge of Sectarian and Ethnic Influences

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## Summary

The Bush Administration has deemed the creation of an effective Iraqi fighting force that is representative of Iraqi society at large as key to stabilizing Iraq and expediting the eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces. However, there is concern that sectarian killings, terrorism, and insurgency are undermining U.S. efforts to create a unified Iraqi military that can prevent internal violence from metastasizing into a larger civil war among Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds. According to the December 2006 Iraq Study Group Report, "Significant questions remain about the ethnic composition and loyalties of some Iraqi units — specifically, whether they will carry out missions on behalf of national goals instead of a sectarian agenda." The 110th Congress may address issues concerning the reforming of Iraq's security forces. This report will be updated periodically. For more information on Iraq, see CRS Report RL31339, *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security Issues*, by Kenneth Katzman.

## Introduction

Since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, U.S. policy has been focused on maintaining the territorial integrity of Iraq and rebuilding its state institutions, including national army and police forces that reflect Iraq's diverse ethnic and sectarian makeup. However, the Sunni-driven insurgency and overall U.S. political reliance on Shiites and Kurds, two historically persecuted Iraqi groups emboldened by the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, have complicated U.S. efforts to forge a truly national Iraqi military. As has been widely reported, Shiites and Kurds comprise a disproportionate amount of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).

It is becoming increasingly evident that some Iraqi Shiite and Kurdish leaders do not believe in the Bush Administration's vision of an Iraq in which all communities share power and the new security forces are representative of Iraqi society at large. With no sign of discernible progress toward national reconciliation on the horizon, there is an ever-increasing risk that U.S.-trained Iraqi soldiers and police will be used by Shiites and Kurds to implement narrow parochial political agendas that exacerbate sectarian strife in

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Iraq. Many observers believe that Shiite parties and militias (the Badr Brigade controlled by the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq and the Mahdi Army controlled by Muqtada al Sadr), through their influence in the Iraqi Interior Ministry and its police forces, are pursuing this strategy. The Iraqi Army (IA) has been less politicized due to overall U.S. control over many of its divisions.[1] Nevertheless, as the United States transfers authority over the IA to Iraqi commanders and the Ministry of Defense (MoD), the risk of IA penetration by either Shiite militias or Sunni insurgents increases dramatically.

## Historical Background

Since its creation at the hands of the British in 1921, the Iraqi army has never been able to effectively integrate the country's Arabs and Kurds, as the army has traditionally been a strong institution and a source of pride among many Iraqi Sunni and some Shiite Arabs. Sunni Arab officers, who had served in both the Ottoman Empire and the Arab revolt against that empire in World War I, formed the core of the nascent army, which was primarily designed to be an internal security force with little or no ability to project power beyond Iraq's borders. During the British mandate (1920-1932), the British effectively controlled the Iraqi army, but curbed its expansion by relying on British air power and an ethnically/religiously-based unit known as the Assyrian levies, which was controlled by the Ministry of the Interior and was used as a bulwark against Turkish meddling in the north and as a counter-insurgency force against rebellious segments of Iraqi society such as the Shiites and Kurds.

After Iraq obtained full independence in 1932, its Sunni army officers became outwardly more politicized, culminating in the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958 by Major General Abdul-Karim Qassim. Sunnis continued to dominate the officer corps of the Iraqi army and, by the early 1960s, Sunnis composed 70% of all officers in the Iraqi army (of whom 45% hailed from Mosul), with Shiites making up 20% and Kurds and other minorities 10%.[2] Relations between Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish officers were tense, due to repeated Kurdish revolts in northern Iraq and institutional discrimination against Shiites within the army.

Saddam Hussein, who himself had no formal military training, purged the army of anyone considered to be a potential threat to him and to the ruling Baath party. He created a number of overlapping security agencies and filled them with members of his immediate family and larger tribe. Saddam largely ignored the regular Iraqi army, with the exception of the elite Republican Guard units, as power within his regime was based largely on his special security agencies which kept close tabs on Iraqi officers. Saddam continued the practice of relegating Shiites to low level positions and to conscripts within the regular army. Shiites took a disproportionate amount of casualties on the front lines of the Iran-

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[1] According to the Congressionally-mandated Department of Defense Quarterly Status Report of November 2006, "The Coalition and the Government of Iraq are committed to creating an Iraqi military that reflects the ethnic and religious fabric of Iraq, with diverse units loyal to the nation, not sectarian interests.... There are, however, indications that political forces in Iraq have influenced senior military appointments on the basis of sectarian affiliation."

[2] Ahmed S. Hashim, "Military Power and State Formation in Modern Iraq," *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2003, Vol.10, Iss.4; p.29.

Iraq War in the 1980s. Ultimately, like other ruthless dictators, Saddam's preference for loyal internal security forces and elite military units succeeded in preventing regular army units from attempting to overthrow the regime.

**Disbanding the Iraqi Army.** The U.S. decision to disband the Iraqi army in May 2003 has been the subject of continuing debate. Many critics point to that decision (Order #2, Dissolution of Entities) as among the most important factors in destabilizing Iraq after the cessation of large scale military operations. Although observers expected U.S. officials to prohibit the upper echelon of Saddam's security forces from rejoining the army, the initial decision to exclude regular army officers and conscripts surprised many analysts who had argued for the Administration to distinguish between Saddam's privileged inner core and the largely neglected regular army. Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, former head of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), defended the policy, noting the role the decree had in reassuring the Kurds that the CPA was serious about creating a united Iraq and convincing them not to secede.[3]

## Current U.S. Training Efforts

During 2004-2006, U.S. policy was focused on rapidly preparing Iraqi forces to take over security responsibilities in order to expedite the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq. The Multi-National Security Training Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I) has been charged with training Iraqi security

### U.S. Assistance to the ISF

Total Appropriations 2003-2006: **$15.4 billion**

$10.4 billion - Iraq Security Forces Fund (ISFF)
$5 billion - Iraq Relief and Reconstruction Fund (IRRF)

**Source**: CRS Report RL31833, *Iraq: Recent Developments in Reconstruction Assistance*, by Curt Tarnoff.

personnel. MNSTC-I is headed by Army Lieutenant General Martin E. Dempsey who recently stated that "The Iraqi Army has the opportunity to be the single institution that can elevate the narrative beyond regional, local, religious interests.... And in most cases they are succeeding in doing so, in other words becoming that institution of national unity."[4]

The Iraq Study Group Report recommends that the highest priority be given to training the ISF and that only the most highly qualified U.S. officers should be assigned to embedded teams.[5] Although many observers consider U.S. advisory efforts crucial to boosting ISF morale and combat effectiveness, critics charge that U.S. training efforts are hampered by several challenges that may be difficult to overcome in the short term. U.S. trainers have complained that they themselves were insufficiently prepared to train foreign soldiers and have only a rudimentary understanding of the Iraqi military and culture. In addition, an overall shortage[6] of qualified U.S. trainers and Arabic translators led the

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[3] L.Paul Bremer III, "The Right Call," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 12, 2005.

[4] "U.S. Military Shifts Troops in Iraq Into Advisory Roles," *New York Times*, December 5, 2006.

[5] See recommendations #43 and #44 of the *Iraq Study Group Report*, December 6, 2006, p.75.

[6] According to one account, an overall shortage of U.S. trainers meant that by the end of 2005,

(continued...)

military to place many junior officers in advisory roles to senior Iraqi officers who have far more combat experience. Finally, U.S. soldiers who make up the military training teams have no formal authority over Iraqi commanders. Complicity between Iraqi ministries in Baghdad and politically-motivated commanders in the field is commonplace, and according to one U.S. soldier, "Right now we cannot even fire Iraqi army leaders [whom] we know cooperate with insurgents or are incompetent."[7]

On January 10, 2007, President Bush tacitly acknowledged the lack of capability of the ISF by announcing that "we will increase the embedding of American advisers in Iraqi Army units and partner a Coalition brigade with every Iraqi Army division." Currently, 4,000 coalition trainers are embedded in Iraqi units. That figure is expected to either triple or quadruple in the coming months. This increase (not a net increase) also reflects an expansion of mission to include operations as well as training. Overall, the Pentagon estimates that approximately 325,000 Iraqi personnel are in the ISF (both army and police); however, due to poor Iraqi record keeping, it is uncertain how many Iraqi soldiers remain in service. As noted in numerous U.S. military and independent studies on the rebuilding effort, chronic absenteeism[8] and high desertion rates lead Iraqi units to be in a constant state of under-capacity, averaging around 65-70% strength at any given moment.[9] Currently, it is not illegal for an Iraqi soldier to abandon his unit or go AWOL. According the U.S. Defense Department, IA AWOL rates exceed 50% when units were directed to deploy to areas of combat outside of their normal areas of operations.

## Shiite Militias

Although militias independent of the Iraqi armed forces were declared illegal under CPA Order #91 (June 2004), in an effort to combat the insurgency and increase the number of Iraqi forces serving in the field, Iraqi and U.S. officials early on allowed some militias to infiltrate their members into the regular Iraqi security forces. In reality, these militias (Badr Brigade[10] and Kurdish *Peshmerga)* remained independent. In retrospect, many observers have decried that decision asserting that it favored short-term political expediency over Iraq's national long-term interests.

Under successive Iraqi transitional and permanent governments, Shiite militias operating under the guise of paramilitary police and army units have used the Sunni insurgent threat to expand their reach, paralyzing any attempt to forge a non-sectarian Iraqi military. The Shiite political parties that control the militias have, through the U.S.-guided political process, gained control over the Iraqi government, making outside efforts

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[6] (...continued)
there were only 700 U.S. police trainers for an Iraqi police force of more than 100,000. See "U.S. Expands Training to Address Iraqi Police Woes," *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 2006.

[7] "U.S. Commanders Advance Plan To Beef Up Training of Iraqi Army," *Wall Street Journal*, December 8, 2006.

[8] The lack of an effective Iraqi banking system for distributing soldiers' salaries means that Iraqi soldiers are generally given one week of leave each month to return home with their pay.

[9] Michael R. Gordon, "An Army of Some," *New York Times*, August 20, 2006.

[10] The Badr Brigade is distrusted by many Sunni Arabs due to its association with Iran (Iran trained and equipped the brigade during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s).

to disband the militias politically unfeasible. The Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army each have penetrated various police agencies. Badr is believed to control elite paramilitary police brigades that can operate anywhere in Iraq. Sadr's Mahdi forces are believed to have penetrated the 140,000-strong Facilities Protection Service.[11]

U.S. oversight of the Iraqi police did not initially focus on sectarianism as a potential issue. According to Major General Joseph D. Peterson, who was the third American general since 2003 charged with overseeing Iraqi police training, "When we stood them up, we didn't ask, 'Are you Sunni or are you Shia?'.... They ended up being 99 percent Shia. Now, when we look at that, we say, 'They do not reflect the population of Iraq.'"[12] Although the current Iraqi Interior Minister, Jawad Bolani (who succeeded Bayan Jabr, a former officer in the military wing of SCIRI), has fired corrupt Interior Ministry employees and even disbanded whole police brigades accused of acting as death squads, Shiite militias have proliferated and may no longer answer directly to their leadership.

**The Battle for Baghdad.** Many analysts believe that under the current Iraqi government headed by Prime Minister Nouri Kamal al Maliki, a Shiite, the Iraqi Army has been underutilized and circumvented, particularly in the capital of Baghdad, by paramilitary police forces widely believed to be operating in collusion with Shiite militias. As U.S. and Iraqi policy makers formulate and revise plans to secure the capital, the Maliki government has been criticized for deploying only two of six additional IA brigades it pledged to reinforce in Baghdad during Operation Together Forward in the summer of 2006. Many believe that Maliki's hesitation stems from his Dawa party's governing alliance with Shiite radical leader Muqtada al Sadr and the fact that IA soldiers serving in Baghdad were recruited locally and therefore more likely to be loyal toward Sadr and other Shiite leaders. The Iraq Study Group Report asserts that the Iraqi government under Maliki has rejected sustained security operations in Sadr City, a vast Baghdad slum protected by Mahdi Army fighters. IA units from outside the capital may be more willing to crack down on Shiite militias, like the Mahdi Army, engaged in sectarian violence, as Shiite soldiers recruited elsewhere may have fewer kinship and tribal ties to Shiites in Baghdad. According to one U.S. Army Colonel serving as an advisor to Iraqi Army units in Baghdad, "what the Iraqi army can't do is protect soldiers when they go home, or protect their families... It's very, very difficult; that's why a solution has to be a political one and not a military one."[13] On January 18, 2007, Iraqi officials announced that, for the first time, it had taken significant action against the Mahdi Army by arresting dozens of its senior leaders.

## Sunni Distrust of the ISF

In the Sunni majority province of Al Anbar, the locus of the Sunni-led insurgency, Sunni participation and cooperation with U.S. and ISF stabilization efforts are severely hampered by the threat of insurgent reprisals against"collaborators" and their families. The local Sunni population views the ISF as a hostile force loyal to a Shiite-dominated

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[11] "U.S. Military Urging Iraq to Rein In Guard Force," *Washington Post*, December 25, 2006.

[12] " U.s. Faces Latest Trouble with Iraqi Forces: Loyalty," *New York Times*, March 6, 2006.

[13] "Iraqi Soldiers Hinder U.S. Efforts to Combat Militias, Tame Baghdad Streets," *Associated Press*, September 24, 2006.

government in Baghdad, installed by the American invaders, and closely aligned with a traditional enemy, Iran. U.S. and Iraqi military commanders have conducted town hall meetings in several Sunni provinces in order to convince tribal leaders to encourage their members to join the ISF. This strategy has met with limited success, though some tribal leaders bent on ridding their towns of foreign fighters have contributed local fighters to the ISF on a temporary basis. Overall, Sunni Arabs have demanded that, rather than working with existing ISF units, they be allowed to raise their own tribal militias. Many analysts believe that tribal units from Sunni areas would be too susceptible to insurgent infiltration. Iraqi Sunni Arabs are unwilling to serve outside their home provinces as required by the Iraqi Army. Sunnis who do serve in the ISF take enormous risk to their personal safety and the safety of their families.

**Shiite Control of the IA?.** According to a January 2007 *Los Angeles Times* report, the IA's 5th Division stationed in Diyala Province, a region north and east of Baghdad with a mix of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, was penetrated by a Shiite militia and subsequently conducted an intimidation campaign against the province's Sunni population. According to the report, the provincial commander was chosen by the Badr Brigade.[14] Colonel Brian D. Jones, who was the commander of U.S. forces in Diyala, suggested that the IA's operations in Diyala came on orders from the central government in Baghdad. According to Col. Jones, "I believe this is a larger plan to make Diyala a Shia province, rather than a Sunni province."[15]

## Kurdish Loyalties?

Many analysts have questioned whether, over the long run, the ISF can successfully integrate Iraqi Arabs and Kurds. Since the start of U.S. efforts to rebuild the Iraqi army, the combination of the Sunni character of the insurgency in conjunction with the poorer quality of the Arab Sunni and Shiite recruits forced U.S. and Iraqi officials to rely heavily on the Kurdish components of the security forces. The Iraq Army's Second and Third Divisions have large Kurdish components. Reportedly, Kurdish brigades of the IA may be deployed to Baghdad in the coming months. Kurdish leaders have insisted on retaining their own militias. Some military analysts note that Kurdish recruits are more loyal to their tribal and political party leaders than they are to the central government in Baghdad, calling into question the viability of a single unified Iraqi army. The combination of a long history of Kurdish-Arab conflict, the use of chemical weapons against Kurdish villages between 1988-1990, and Kurdish desires for autonomy may have produced a strong antipathy among Kurdish politicians for a strong, centralized military force in Iraq. According to Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party, one of the two main Kurdish parties, "We want to keep our *Peshmerga* because they are a symbol of resistance...it's not a matter to be discussed or negotiated."[16]

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[14] "A Promising Iraqi Province Is Now A Tinderbox," *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2007.

[15] "Sectarian Rifts Foretell Pitfalls of Iraqi Troops Taking Control," *New York Times*, November 12, 2006.

[16] "Kurds Vow to Retain Militia as Guardians of Autonomy," *New York Times*, Feb. 27, 2005.